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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent social psychology studies on the influence of message characteristics, issue involvement, and the subject's cognitive response on perceptions of the communicator. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is used as a framework to discuss various approaches to persuasion, particularly central and peripheral routes to attitude change. Effects associated with the ELM on cognitive responses and subsequent attitude change are described. The counseling literature is reviewed concerning the expertness component of counselor credibility, and its influence on client attitudes and behavior change. The role of verbal and nonverbal behavior cues and issue involvement in predicting the effectiveness of expert or nonexpert counselors is also discussed. Recipient factors, such as need for cognition, cognitive style, and field dependence/independence are considered. The need for an integration of research from social psychology and counseling in the area of interpersonal influence is discussed. Future directions for additional counseling research and practice are suggested, and the importance of being aware of message quality and client factors in counseling interventions is stressed. (JAC)

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Source, Message, and Recipient Factors in Counseling and Psychotherapy

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The Elaboration Likelihood Model

Recent work in social psychology includes a number of studies which have indicated that the effects of communicator experitise may be more predictable when the quality of the message given by the communicator, the pro- or conterattitudinal nature of the topic, and the subject's motivation and ability to process are taken into account (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979a, 1979b; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). Petty and Cacioppo (1981) have introduced a framework, termed the Elaboration

Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion in which these variables represent various approaches to persuasion that can be thought of as emphasizing two dinstinct routes that form the poles of a continuum to attitude change. One, called the central route views attitude change as resulting from a diligent consideration of information that is central to what people believe are the true merits of an advocated position. Thus, a person must be able to think about and be motivated to scrutinize the merits of an advocacy (e.g., high issue involvement) as this is posited to be the most direct determinant of the direction and amount of persuasion produced. If the person lacks the motivation and/or ability to think about a message, attitudes may be affected by positive and negative cues, or the person may use a simple decision rule to evaluate a persuasive message. These cues or inferences may stem from characteristics of the source (e.g., expertise, attractiveness), or the message (e.g., number of arguments in the absence of more simple cues such as source credibility). Such attention to cues and decision rules may shape attitudes or allow a person to decide what attitudinal position to adopt without the need for engaging in any extensive cognitive work

relevant to the issue under consideration. This latter process constitutes the peripheral route to persuasion. Two important advantages of the central route are that attitudinal changes tend to persist longer and are more predictive of behavior than changes induced via the peripheral route (Cialdini, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1981).

In most of the earlier studies, attitudes in response to highly involving communications were primarily affected by message factors, and attitudes in response to low involving communications were affected primarily by source factors. Cacioppo, Petty, and Stoltenberg (in press) however, note that the central/peripheral distinction is not a distinction between message and source factors (i.e., either source or message factors can serve as peripheral cues). In Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (1981) and Chaiken (1980) the source of the message served as a peripheral cue under low involvement conditions. In a recent study (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), the simple number of arguments presented in support of a recommendation of low personal relevance to the subjects served as a peripheral cue in the absence of more simple cues (e.g., source expertise, attractiveness). Attitudes reported by the subjects toward a counterattitudinal advocacy were more positive

in response to nine as opposed to three supportive arguments. In contrast, when the recommendation was of high personal relevance, attitudes were affected by the quality of the message arguments (central route), as the simple number of arguments had no effect.

Chaiken (1980) and Petty & Cacioppo (1981) as well as a number of investigations that follow have utilized the assessment of cognitive responses (e.g., listing thoughts) as a dependent measure and mediator of attitude change. This cognitive response approach to persuasion contends that the attitude change that results from exposure to externally generated messages is due to the thoughts that the message recipient generates in response to the communication (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Advocates of the cognitive response approach assume that when a person anticipates or receives a persuasive communication, an attempt is made to relate the information in the message to the prexisting knowledge that the person has about the topic (Greenwald, 1968; Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981). In other words, the person will consider a substantial amount of information that is not found in the communication itself. These additional self-generated cognitive responses (i.e., thoughts) may be favorable or

agree with the proposals made in the message, unfavorable or disagree, or neutral or irrelevant to the communication. Therefore, these cognitions elicited at the time of message exposure reflect information processing activity and serve to determine the amount and direction of attitude change that is produced (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). For example, a communication that elicits issue relevant thoughts which are primarily favorable toward a particular recommendation would be expected to produce agreement, whereas a communication which elicits thoughts which are unfavorable toward the recommendation would be expected to be ineffective in achieving attitude change (Cacioppo et al., in press).

As seen above, when a highly credible source presents a counterattitudinal message under conditions of low involvement, Petty and Cacioppo (1981) contend that less thinking (cognitive effort) about the advocacy is undertaken by the subjects resulting in fewer counterarguments and more persuasion than with a source of low credibility. Several lines of evidence, however, suggest that message recipients are less motivated to think about proattitudinal than counterattitudinal appeals (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1979a, 1979b). Consequently, the persuasive advantage shifts when a

proattitudinal advocacy is presented under low involvement conditions. That is, less thinking about the message presented by a highly credible source would result in fewer favorable thoughts being generated and subsequently, less persuasion than would result from a message advocated by a less credible source (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

Stoltenberg, Cacioppo, Petty, and Davis (1984) tested the interactive effects of message quality, issue involvement, and source credibility with the use of proattitudinal appeals. College students were exposed to a strong or weak quality proattitudinal message supporting the institution of a mandatory study skills and career exploration course. Similar to previous studies, this message emanated from a source judged to possess either moderate or high credibility. Issue involvement was manipulated by informing subjects that the course would either be instituted at their own university (high), or at a major eastern university the following fall semester (low). When the message was of high personal relevance emanating from highly credible source, results showed that attitudes and behavior were primarily influenced by the high quality of the message. When a highly involving communication was from a source

of moderate credibility, however, there was no effect for message quality. In contrast, for low involved subjects, attitudes and behavior were influenced when the quality of the message was high and emanated from a source of moderate credibility. No differences for message quality were obtained for low involvement subjects exposed to a highly credible source. Thus, the studies by Stoltenberg et al., (1984) and Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt (1978) lend support to the differences in persuasion due to proattitudinal appeals hypothesized by Petty and Cacioppo (1979a, 1979b) and accounted for by the ELM.

To summarize the effects associated with the ELM upon cognitive responses and subsequent attitude change, it appears that for issues of low prior knowledge or low involvement, high source expertise inhibits the generation of thoughts. This occurs as low involved subjects are generally not motivated or able to evaluate the information in a message. Whatever thinking occurs will tend to be guided by a prexisting bias (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981), or by attending to non-content cues (e.g., perceived expertness of the source). As sources of high credibility under low involvement conditions elicit less thinking than sources of moderate or low

credibility, expert sources will facilitate persuasion on counterattitudinal issues. This occurs because expert sources inhibit the unfavorable thoughts or counterarguments that would be the likely cognitive responses if subjects were thinking about the counterattitudinal issue, resulting in more agreement with expert than nonexpert communicators. However, when a proattitudinal message is presented, the same inhibitory effect tends to work against persuasion as fewer favorable thoughts are generated when the source is high rather than low or moderate in credibility. Therefore, a more favorable attitude may actually occur in response to a nonexpert.

As the ELM postulates, the situation is very different when the issue is highly involving or when a person has considerable prior knowledge about a topic. In this case, an individual is likely to invest more effort in evaluating what a communicator has to say, since the motivation and ability to think about a message are likely to be high. In such situations a communicator who is perceived as an expert will be listened to carefully by the subject as more accurate information is expected as compared to a nonexpert (Hass, 1981). If this is true, then an individual is

more likely to evaluate the cogency of the message arguments and be guided less by their prexisting attitudes, which were noted to be important under low involvement conditions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Thus, within this framework, the persuasive advantage of increased expertise is confined to messages of high quality. If the message quality is weak, the credibility effect is attenuated or reversed. In this manner, source expertise does not act as a cue per se, but serves to enhance issue relevant thinking. As a result, if the information and concern conveyed by the expert communicator are of high quality, the subjects' thoughts or cognitive responses will more likely be favorable, and his or her own attitudes will be influenced accordingly. Furthermore, the attitude changes produced should relate to actual behavior (Cialdini et al., 1981). Initial support for this attitude-behavior link has been obtained by Petty, Cacioppo, and Schuman (1983).

Counseling Literature

Since Strong's initial formulation in 1968, considerable research in counseling has investigated the expertness component of counselor crediblity and its influence on client attitudes and behavior change. For

example, examination of the literature reveals that cues associated with counselor nonverbal and verbal behavior (e.g., appearing attentive, confident, organized; using jargon, interpretive statements, etc.) consistently affect ratings of perceived counselor expertness (e.g., Schmidt & Strong, 1970; Dell & Schmidt, 1976; Atkinson & Carskadden, 1975; Claiborn, 1979). Reputational cues of counselor expertness (e.g., Brooks, 1974; Claiborn & Schmidt, 1977; Hartly, 1969). However, evidential cues of characteristics associated with the counselor such as attire, sex, and race do not consistently affect client perceptions of counselor expertness, and yield mixed and inconclusive results (e.g., Heppner & Pew, 1977; Merluzzi, Merluzzi, & Kaul, 1977; Cimbolic, 1972; Peoples & Dell, 1975). These findings have lead Heppner and Dixon (1981) to conclude that evidential characteristics may in fact affect perceptions of counselor expertness, but may only account for a small portion of the variance, especially when compared with the percentage of variance accounted for by other sources of expertness such as expert role behaviors.

Combining two or more sources also appears to enhance perceived expertise (e.g., Guttman & Haase, 1972; Strong & Schmidt, 1978; Heppner & Dixon, 1978).

For example, when reputation and behavior are consistent, clients' evaluations of high counselor expertise result. When these cues are inconsistent, however, it is unclear which will predominate in determining clients' ratings (Corrigan, Dell, Lewis & Schmidt, 1980). Also, as Corrigan et al. (1980) point out, most of the studies provide no information concerning the weight of evidential, behavioral, and reputational cues in relation to one another in determining a client's perception of a counselor's expertness.

Overall, the counseling studies indicate that various stimuli cue a client's perceptions of counselor expertise, but the function of these client perceptions is unclear (Heppner & Dixon, 1981). Like the findings in social psychology, however, counseling studies are equivocal in delineating the exact conditions under which perceived expertise will affect social influence. For example, some studies have found that expert counselors produce more attitude and behavior change than nonexperts (e.g., Heppner & Dixon, 1978; Strong & Schmidt, 1970; Fridenberg & Gillis, 1977), while others have found that both kinds of counselors produce about the same amount of change (e.g., Greenberg, 1969;

Sprafkin, 1970; Brischetto & Merluzzi, 1981).

The ELM and Studies in Counseling

The variables of issue involvement, the pro- or counterattitudinal nature of the topic, and message quality in terms of central versus peripheral processing were note included in Strong's (1968) model. Thus, it may be useful to examine their role in predicting greater effectiveness for expert than nonexpert counselors. Moreover, as Heppner and Dixon (1981) point out, the interpersonal influence process in counseling was originally based on research from social psychology. However, there is a need for greater integration of previous work and more current research from social psychology. Petty, Cacioppo, and Heesacker (1984) and Cacioppo, Petty, and Stoltenberg (in press) postulate that the ELM may have potential utility for understanding the interpersonal influence process, and may be able to account for the sometimes inconsistent findings within this area of study.

Past investigations within counseling have typically manipulated message quality as an aspect of counselor expertise (e.g., Sprafkin, 1970; Scheid, 1976), while issue involvement has usually been ignored as issues have not been determined to be personally

involving for the typically employed samples of college students used as potential clients or client surrogates (e.g., Brooks, 1974; Heppner & Pew, 1977). Some investigators appear to have assessed issue involvement through the manipulation of levels of client "perceived need" or request for help (Heppner & Dixon, 1978; Dixon & Claiborn, 1981), and motivation for counseling (Heppner & Heesacker, 1982) thus far resulting in no differential effects. Dixon and Claiborn (1981) also defined client need in terms of "commitment to change." Highly committed subjects who were induced to sign a written contract to complete relevant "out of session" behavioral task assignments demonstrated higher rates of compliance than subjects in a low commitment condition. No differences, however, were reported for attitude change measures. Consequently, all of the above authors have called for better operational definitions and more research in regards to the variable of client need. The importance of client need or issue involvement lies not only in its relationship to attitude and behavior change, but also in the ability to generalize from subjects in analogue studies to clients actively seeking counseling services, assuming that the latter may reflect moderate to high levels of issue involvement

(Cacioppo et al., in press).

An investigation by Stoltenberg & McNeill (1984) addressed the couseling researchers' concerns by looking at issue involvement in an attempt to provide an initial validation for the ELM in a counseling analogue setting. College students listened to an audiotaped proattitudinal counseling session consisting of a counselor working with a student whose career goals differed from those of his parents. Subjects were assigned to conditions of high and low issue involvement based on their scores on the career decisiveness scale of the Career Maturity Inventory (Crites, 1978a, 1978b). Subjects in the low involvement conditions were operationally defined as those who demonstrated a high degree of career decisiveness and, consequently, would engage in less issue relevant thinking while listening to a counseling session dealing with a career decision-making problem. Conversely, subjects in high involvement conditions were those who were lower in career decisiveness, and therefore, would be more motivated to attend to a discussion on choosing a career. The variable of counselor expertise was manipulated by a presession introduction of a counselor of high or moderate credibility. Message quality was

held constant at a high level, while the topic of the session was previously determined to be proattitudinal in nature.

After listening to the tape, subjects were asked to complete a thought listing procedure designed to tape the cognitive processing theorized to account for response differences. In addition, subjects were required to indicate their degree of agreement with the way the counseling session was conducted. In line with previous social psychological findings, three hypotheses for high quality proattitudinal messages were partially supported. First, subjects who were exposed to a highly credible counselor and were highly involved expressed more agreement and listed fewer unfavorable thoughts in regard to the way the interview was conducted than highly involved subjects exposed to a moderately credible counselor. Second, subjects low in involvement expressed more agreement when exposed to a moderately credible couselor than a highly credible counselor. Third, subjects in the highly involved condition agreed more and listed fewer unfavorable thoughts (than subjects under low involvement conditions) with the highly credible counselor. No differences in favorable thoughts were found. Thus, overall, the attitudinal

data supported all three hypotheses, while the cognitive response data was equivocal. The lack of support with positive thoughts particularly may have been due to the proattitudinal content of the topic on which subjects already agreed with the counselor. Hence, one risks a ceiling effect when attempting to increase favorable thoughts.

A recent study by McNeill and Stoltenberg (1984) expanded the earlier study to include a weak message (counseling session) and addressed specific recommendations made by the counselor. Results indicated that message quality was an overwhelmingly strong influence on attitudes and behavioral intentions. The pattern of results suggested that our subjects were generally engaging in cognitive processing toward the central route pole of the continuum, but not with the degree of diligence often found in lab research. A related behavior measure (asking for additional career information) suggested that a high quality message and high issue involvement were both necessary for behavioral compliance to occur. These results indicated the important of "personal consequences" in operationalizing issue involvement.

Recipient Factors

Thus far we've focused on source and message factors in social influence. Recipient or client factors are also important to consider. This, of course, should prove no surprise as Kiesler (1971) and Strupp (1978) have called for examining the effectiveness of various aproaches to counseling and therapy for various client types. Social psychological research has noted that factors such as need for cognition (Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983) and field dependence/independence (Heesacker, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1983) can affect the likelihood that the individual will engage in either central or peripheral route processing. A recent study by Stoltenberg, Maddux, and Pace (in press) used scores on the Thinking/Feeling scale on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to investigate the effects of cognitive style and perceived counselor credibility on attitudes toward an REI counseling session. Results indicated Thinking type subjects reported more favorable attitudes toward the counselor and the counseling approach than Feeling types. It was also found that the effect was enhanced when the counselor was introduced as highly credible and minimized with a low credibility introduction.

Conclusion - Future Directions

Source factors do appear to hold some importance for additional counseling research and practice. Some factors like credibility can enhance central route processing, while at other times may limit central processing. Attractiveness is probably less crucial in eventual behavior change as it is more likely to affect attitudes via the peripheral route, and is unlikely to significantly affect behavior. Counselor trustworthiness, on the other hand, is probably a necessary precondition for client susceptibility to persuasive appeals.

For counseling, there appears to be a potential danger in relying on source cues to elicit attitude change in the absence of client perceived personal consequences for the topic of discussion. Transitory attitude change may result, but without central route processing (or a diligent consideration of the topic) behavior change should not be expected.

In the interest of brevity, I'll summarize by saying that message quality of counseling interventions would appear to be of critical importance. Functionally strong messages for specific counseling topics will vary, however, from client to client. Thus, the importance of client or recipient factors should be of

central concern for researchers and practitioners. Our own research suggests counseling style may be an important component of message quality along with the cogency of arguments presented. Further work is necessary to identify effective specific interventions for various client types given the particular focus of counseling.

In brief, the picture increases in complexity as we look more closely at the counseling process. A number of activities, thoughts, and emotions occur during any counseling session. Researchers must take care in specifying which aspects of the counseling process are being investigated and strive to creatively (and validly) operationalize the factors of interest.

Most presentations of this type tend to end with a call for more relevant applied research. This, of course, is important. But it is my belief that there are many more controlled studies that also need to be conducted to further delineate important counseling processes that my be obscured by the plethora of variables present in counseling. Both paradigms are necessary for us to gain a scientific understanding of the counseling process.

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